

Prejudice in Shakespeare's work and times

Lesson plan

Topic: Shakespeare and prejudice: *The Merchant of Venice*; *Othello*; *The Taming of the Shrew*

Level: B2

Time: 75-85 minutes

Aims

- to introduce students to three of Shakespeare's best-known plays, all of which have been quite controversial as being sexist or racist
- to help students to understand a little about Shakespearian society and how it might have differed from modern-day society and mores
- to provoke discussion about prejudice in general terms as well as relating it to Shakespearian plays

Introduction

Students start by looking at the idea of stereotypes, concentrating on stereotypes about the English. They then start to look at possible stereotypes of their own cultures/nationalities, which leads into some work on the notion of prejudice (including vocabulary).

The lesson then goes on to look at attitudes towards women and different race in Shakespeare's time, to give students a little background before looking at three well-known Shakespeare plays: *The Merchant of Venice*, *The Taming of the Shrew* and *Othello* – all of which have been accused of being sexist or racist. Students consider whether they think the plots might be sexist or racist, and then look at some alternative interpretations.

They then study in some more detail a famous speech by Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*, in which he talks about how he has been discriminated against for being a Jew.

Finally there is a discussion about whether it is a good idea to censor old books, plays or films which offend modern-day sensibilities.

Procedure

Warmer – Stereotypes (10 minutes)

The warmer is intended to start students thinking about prejudice and the way that people often make assumptions about those who are different from themselves.

- (a) Ask students to work in pairs or small groups, look at the picture and discuss how typical they think it really is of an Englishman. In fact, it is pretty unusual these days to find someone who dresses this way, even in the City of London, where the bowler hat was traditionally worn by men working in the financial markets.
- (b) Then ask them to discuss how true they think the list of stereotypes are. Obviously this is a matter of opinion, but as an English person, I'd say that none of them was really true except maybe the first one!
- This discussion should start to bring up the idea of stereotypes often being offensive.

- (c) Finally ask them to discuss stereotypes of their own country or culture, saying how much truth (if any) they think is in them. In a mixed nationality group, be aware that this discussion may bring up some sensitive topics.

Task 1 – Vocabulary (10 minutes)

- (a) Ask students to match the words and definitions. These are all words which should be useful in later discussions. Note that the difference in meaning between prejudice and discrimination is to do with whether we are talking about a belief or actions someone takes because of that belief. Racism and sexism are both examples of prejudice. Not giving a person a job because they are a woman would be an example of discrimination based on a prejudice.

Answers:

- 1 *Not liking or trusting someone because of their race, religion or gender – prejudice*
- 2 *The belief that some races of people are better than others – racism*
- 3 *The unfair treatment of people, especially women, because of their gender – sexism*
- 4 *Treating one person or group worse than others – discrimination*

- (b) Students then find the adjective form of each noun. Word-building in this way is a useful way of increasing vocabulary and, again, the words will be useful in the rest of the lesson.
- (c) Ask the students to complete the sentences using the most appropriate noun or adjective.

Answers:

- 1 *sexist*
- 2 *racism*
- 3 *Discrimination*
- 4 *prejudiced*

- (d) Finally ask students to think of an example for each noun or adjective. As well as providing a further check of their ability to understand and use the words, this will set the scene for the following discussions on different aspects of prejudice.

Task 2 – Prejudice in Shakespeare's time (5–10 minutes)

- (a) Ask students to work in small groups to discuss the first question. Depending on their background knowledge, this discussion may be very short or quite extended.
- (b) Then ask them to read the short text and compare it with their ideas. They should then discuss what they read and say if anything surprised them.

Task 3 – Prejudice in Shakespeare's plays? (15 minutes)

- Put students into groups of three and **ask each student to read a different synopsis**.
- Then ask them to tell the others in their group about the synopsis and to discuss whether they think the plays show racism, sexism or any other kind of prejudice. Note that this could be Shakespeare's prejudice or it could be the prejudice of characters in the play (not necessarily Shakespeare's own).

Task 4 – A different perspective (10 minutes)

- In the same groups (or possibly in different ones for a change), ask students to read and discuss the opinions.

- Feedback on the task as a whole class. Try to draw out the idea that, just because there are racist/sexist characters in the plays, this does not necessarily mean that Shakespeare agreed with what his characters were saying.

Task 5 – Shylock’s speech from *The Merchant of Venice* Act 3 Scene 1 (15–20 minutes)

- Explain that this speech comes when, having failed to repay the loan, Antonio is threatened with having to give Shylock a pound of his flesh. Shylock is explaining why he is acting so cruelly. Give students a chance to read the speech and then ask them to try and answer the questions.
- Depending on the level/confidence of your students you might want to give them the modern day ‘translation’:

[He (Antonio) has insulted me and cost me half a million ducats. He’s laughed at my losses, made fun of my profit, humiliated my race, thwarted my business deals, turned my friends against me, made my enemies hate me more—and why has he done all this? Because I’m a Jew. Doesn’t a Jew have eyes? Doesn’t a Jew have hands, organs, a human shape, five senses, emotions and feelings? Doesn’t a Jew eat the same food, get hurt with the same weapons, get sick with the same diseases, get healed by the same medicine, and get warm in summer and cool in winter just like a Christian does? If you prick us, don’t we bleed? If you tickle us, don’t we laugh? If you poison us, don’t we die? And if you treat us badly, won’t we try to get revenge? If we’re like you in everything else, we’ll be like you in that respect too.]

Suggested answers:

1. *Shylock says that Antonio has treated him very badly – insulting him, turning people against him, etc. He believes that Antonio has done this for no other reason than that Shylock is Jewish.*
2. *He says that Jews are physically the same, have the same emotions and react to things in just the same way as anyone else.*
3. *This is a matter of opinion. It is a very impressive speech, and there is clearly a lot of truth in it. However, he is still being very cruel, and maybe this is just a clever excuse.*
4. *Again, a matter of opinion.*

Task 6 – Class discussion (10 minutes)

Ask students to look at the statements and try and decide which statement they agree with most. It might help to give them an example. For instance, because Shakespeare’s imagery often uses ‘black’ as a synonym for ‘evil’, phrases such as ‘black hearted’ are sometimes changed when the plays are produced. Is this a good idea, or is it ridiculous to change Shakespeare’s language because our modern ideas are different?

Put students in pairs and allocate one of the statements (so there are even numbers looking at each statement). Explain that it doesn’t matter if they agree with the statement or not, they simply need to think of examples or arguments to support it. These do not have to be about Shakespeare, but could be about any book or play or television programme from the past which has scenes which would no longer be acceptable in today’s society.

Put the pairs into four and let them try to argue the two points. Because they are not necessarily giving their true opinions, they should feel freer to make strong statements.